

Select

Furniture & Interiors of Ireland

WINNER OF THE
PPAI ANNUAL
PUBLICATION
AWARD 2003

**Five fab
homes**
from Derry
to Cork

Create a splash
by building
your own bath

Page upon page of
special objects to buy

**A secret
garden**
on Dublin's coast

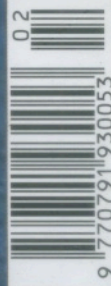
Find an interior designer
anywhere in Ireland
through our directory

Accessible art
nab a masterpiece
in your local shop



€4.25
£3.15

Autumn
04





Lofty design

New Barn Houses in Northern Ireland show how it's possible to create modern homes that speak of traditional, local buildings, writes Paul Clarke

Photographs by Phil Lauterbach

In Seamus Heaney's first collection of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, he describes the corrugated roof, the concrete floor, and the strange profiles of various farm implements in the barn on his family's farm.

Transformed by his childhood imagination, his description of this ordinary farmyard building explores just how rooted these humble structures have become in the Irish landscape and that of our collective imagination.

Barn structures, like the hedgerows of Ireland, are so plentiful that we take them for granted. Merging with the landscape, we no longer look at them, and see them as utilitarian and without architecture. But like the poet's ability to uncover the sublime in the everyday, the architect's eye discovers the unrecognised qualities of these often forgotten buildings.

Known locally as "the Barn Houses," a family of new structures has recently appeared amid the countryside Seamus Heaney grew up in, and describes in his poetry.

Unnoticed set in a patchwork of fields and the confetti of





dispersed farms and settlements, these houses illustrate an architectural approach that is informed by the traditions of Northern Irish rural building.

Doug Elliot of architects twenty-two over seven in Belfast, who conceived the projects and designed them with colleague Kieran McGonigle, has a passion for the diversity and visual richness of many of the older rural structures of Northern Ireland. He believes much of this important rural tradition has been lost in the race to 'suburbanise' the countryside.

"House building in Northern Ireland has generally ignored traditional vernacular or agricultural models," he says, "turning instead to suburban typologies." The design of this sea of houses is propelled, by what he believes is a "misplaced aspiration for suburban models".

The development of these new homes, counters that trend. Consisting of two single-storey houses near Bellaghy, and a two-storey house at Castledawson, the 'Barn Houses' cultivate an awareness of tradition with the need to create modern and contemporary houses for a rural setting.

At Bellaghy, two houses are paired in a relationship that recalls the placing of traditional dwellings. An earlier development by twenty-two over seven at Magherafelt called the Clachan – which won an RIBA Housing award – showed this affinity with traditional clusters.

The positioning of these two houses at Bellaghy allows for both privacy and an opportunity for exchanges to take place between the houses. They have learned from the experience implicit in the careful siting and establishment of small communities that was once common in this part of Northern Ireland. There are echoes of Le Corbusier's Jaoul houses that are similarly paired and informed by vernacular models and references.

The three houses are timber frame structures with a rendered masonry outer skin. This combines a well-insulated and thermally responsive shell with the robustness necessary to deal with the semi-bogland climate.

A serpentine ridge of earth is shaped into a mounded garden between the houses. Planted with wild flowers, this ridge frames the parking spaces and entrance, while echoing the profile of the

The houses are remarkably spacious, with large open-plan kitchens, living and dining areas





distant Sperrin Mountains. There's been no attempt to cosmeticise nature. The external spaces of the houses are compact and relate to the long established mature hedgerows and trees. These external terraces extend the inside spaces of the houses outside, to enjoy views of the wider landscape.

These two long white houses mainly comprise two volumes set at right angles to one another forming a T-shaped plan. The larger space has an aluminium barrel roof while the other has a pitched slate roof. This dialogue between the two forms – present in the typical cluster of rural farm buildings – allows an interior contrast of space and profile. The two forms co-exist easily, bedding the houses into the landscape and defining external space around them.

The change in materials gives richness to this duality of forms,

The interior is flexible. Glazed sliding screens allow a reconfiguration of the space and generous window openings fill the houses with light





which in turn is united by the simple proportions and clean white envelope of masonry walls.

The entrances are at the junction between the two spaces, which allows the circulation to be compact while giving a sense of openness and journey between the different rooms.

Remarkably spacious with a large open-plan kitchen, living and dining space, the curved profile of the barrel roof inside registers the changing light outside.

The interior is flexible and informal; part open plan, part rooms. The glazed sliding screens allow a reconfiguration of the space and the generous window openings fill the spaces with light. Etched glass, panels and small picture windows – which seem to punch through the walls – either reveal the scale of the space inside or provide intimacy.

The dark stained doors and windows act as picture frames for the landscape. Storage, which is vital to a family house but often

The curved profile of the barrel roof inside the houses registers the changing light outside



@ TileStyle



neglected, is maximised and fully integrated into the layout of these houses.

The house at Castledawson adopts a similar approach to that of the Bellaghy houses but here the barrel roof is elevated to two storeys. Facing south over a secluded tree-edged garden, the garage becomes a pavilion to the larger metal-clad volume. Two sliding doors, front and back of the garage, can be pulled back to reveal a Japanese like framed view of the garden beyond. Close to a farm, the dialogue with this house and tradition is even more poignant and legible. The texture of the corrugated metal cladding continues the conversation with surrounding agricultural buildings.

Inside, the large two-storey space of the living room is dramatic, with large studio windows. A slot staircase lifts towards the curve of the barrel roof, connecting two upper bedrooms.

This house, which was designed before the Bellaghy houses but constructed after them, reveals a continuing development of the Barn House theme.

The houses were built and commissioned by a local family of builders, Gribbon Construction. From a background of speculative housing they have worked closely with twenty two over seven on a number of innovative projects.

Liam Gribbon's enthusiastic support of the architects' vision for these homes and the close working relationship of the three Gribbon brothers with Doug Elliot have enabled these remarkable Barn Houses to enter the often restrictive and limited market of speculative housing.

With all three houses currently for sale they have aroused much local speculation about what exactly a Barn House is. Establishing an important dialogue with tradition and uncovering often ignored regional qualities, these houses are also unmistakably contemporary.

It is appropriate that they are all close to the Seamus Heaney archive and museum in Bellaghy, where the words of the poet, like the architectural ideas for these houses, straddle both time and memory.